

Dr. Bindu Nair

Associate Professor of English

S.D.College,

Alappuzha, Kerala, India

### Discourses In Dialogue: Narrative Strategies in Mahasweta Devi's Fiction.

**Abstract:** The celebrated Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi's engagement with tribal history determines both the content and the form of her fiction. Through a deft inter-weaving of history, fiction and folklore, she seeks to re-inscribe their history and tribal identity into the contemporary situation. Mahasweta has created a unique narrative style, rejecting the linear, monologic and descriptive mode of narration used in historic / realistic novels. Instead, she favours a flexible narrative that incorporates different discourses, dialects and socio-linguistic registers that dialogically engage with one another to give her novels a Bakhtinian "novelness".

Mahasweta Devi, the celebrated Bengali writer and activist, who had dedicated her life to telling the tale of the tribal in modern India, has repeatedly averred that it is history, or rather the omissions and commissions involved in the writing of India's "official" history that engaged her interest at the outset of her creative journey. She hears the resounding silences in mainstream historical discourse on the subject of the tribal and takes it upon herself to fill those silences with the tales of the tribals of India. Her engagement with history determines both the content and the form of her creative writing. History is not just a reference point in her weaving of the tale, it is the tale itself and the telling of the tale too. In an interview with Gayatri Spivak, Mahasweta speaks of India's tribal history as a continuum that runs parallel to the "official" discourse of Indian history, although never entering it directly. "Tribal

history is not seen as a continuity in Indian historiography... Yet it is still continuing, the tribals are still being evicted from their land..." ("Telling History", Chotti Munda x) She compares tribal history to a full and flowing river which is not without a destination, but which is largely unnoticed and forgotten in India because it is "unwritten history" (xi). In her writing, both fiction and non-fiction, she has mainly tried to re-inscribe this erased history into the mainstream of Indian historical discourse.

From the 1960s onwards, when she made a momentous and conscious decision to give up her secure life and wander the plains of India in search of the tribals' tale, her involvement has been such that there is no area of tribal life that she has not experienced first hand. By accessing and researching historical records, collecting and recording oral narratives, and documenting the material details of contemporary tribal life, Mahasweta has brought to light the hidden world of the tribals in India. From the story of one of the most ancient of India's forest tribes, the hunting-gathering Shabars, in *The Book of the Hunter* to that of the poor Nagesia tribals in modern day Madhya Pradesh in the story "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha", Mahasweta traces the journey of the tribal from a life of independence, autonomy and ethnic pride to their present deprived, marginalized and graceless existence.

Mahasweta's innovative use of the genre of the "historical novel" has led to considerable critical interest and debate in literary circles. History manifests itself in her works in more than one dimension. She contextualizes the historical moment, both in its spatial and temporal dimensions. In all her fictional works dealing with the tribal subject, she paints a wide canvas, but without ever losing sight of the specific time and the local context. Each of her works deals with the issues of specific tribes- Mundas, Santhals, Oraons, Shabars, Asurs - seeking to recreate a specific socio-historic milieu through a deft interweaving of history, fiction and folklore, bringing alive a particular time and space.

In Aranyer Adhikar, she recreates the history of the Munda tribe in the context of the tribal revolt (the “Ulgulan”) led by Birsa Munda against the British colonial regime during the nineteenth century. Chotti Munda and his Arrow traces a century’s history of the Munda tribes of Chotanagpur from pre-colonial times to the present day through the life and times of the central character Chotti Munda, set against the backdrop of India’s nationalist movement, peasant revolts and related class struggles of the said period. The Book of the Hunter, one of her most thought provoking books on tribal history, recreates the history of the Shabar tribes as they lived in the sixteenth century, but with resonances into their contemporary context. The much discussed story, “Draupadi” deals with the resistance of a woman of the Santhal tribe, articulated within the context of the Naxalite movement in West Bengal in the 1970s.

Her narratives usually begin by establishing the context with the minimum of description, and anchoring it firmly in the specific region and time-frame of history. The following passage is an example: “The place is on the Gomo-Daltonganj line. Trains stopped at this station once upon a time... The billboard says ‘Kuruda Outstation, Abandoned’...” (“The Hunt” IM 1) Every event in the character’s life is thus historicized, as in this passage from Chotti Munda, “All this happened in 1915. When Chotti was fifteen.” (9) Tribal life and history are thus contextualized within the larger socio-political-historic situation in India. The individual subaltern characters too are rooted within the specific context, and are not developed further in their individual dimensions. Even their emotional, psychological and moral dimensions are articulated only in conjunction with the specific context of their tribe.

She foregoes the usual methods of character delineation, that is, of the descriptive narration of the physical, emotional or psychological states of the characters. Instead, she favours a technique whereby the character is established through interaction with other characters through the elements of plot and dialogue, and is given minimal descriptive space. They are thus saved from becoming hazy figures or mere character types by the power and

poignancy of their portrayal. The story of her characters becomes inseparable from the story of their tribe as they seek to re-inscribe their history and tribal identity into their contemporary situation. Her characters very often assume mythical proportions in this context. The historical figure of Birsa Munda of Aranyer Adhikar takes on mythical dimensions as he is echoed in the characters of Dhani Munda, and again in Chotti Munda in Agnigarbha and in Chotti Mnda and his Arrow. In *The Book of the Hunter*, the Shabar couple Kalya and Phuli are named after their mythical ancestors, and they themselves become part of the myth as they play out their roles in the tragic contemporary history of their tribe. When the spirit of the ancestors visits Bikhia's hut as the Pterodactyl, he eventually becomes inseparable from its presence and its message. Thus myth and history coalesce in Mahasweta's narratives as she articulates both the unrecorded tribal past and its engagements with the contemporary reality of the tribal characters.

Characters from the other side of the tribal/non-tribal divide also appear in her novels in their historical capacities. Kings, soldiers and priests from the pre-colonial period, as well as colonial officials, feudal lords, administrators, and the common people appear in her works along with the tribal characters. Contemporary history is recorded through the figures of the Tribal Welfare Officer, the BDO, the SDO, the wily and self-serving politician, pompous bureaucrats, rapacious middlemen, the committed social worker, the academic anthropologist, the scholarly barman priest, and the conscientious journalist and so on, as they interact with the marginalized tribals in modern India. Thus each of her works narrativizes tribal history and culture with all its specificities of region, tribe, gender, class and language, placed in continuous dialogue with the larger social and historical context.

History also takes the form of documentary realism in her fiction. Her activist work and journalistic reportage form an integral part of her narrative, both in terms of content and style. The everyday details of the material realities of tribal life are recorded with absolute

accuracy and unromantic realism in her fiction. This includes the statistical details of food production, details of labour and wages, their access to resources like food and water, problems related to education and employment, the damage to their habitat and environment, etc. Anjum Katyal observes that “There is the materiality of the text, its relentless desentimentalization, No romantic clichés are permitted to stand, nor idealized notions of village life.” (7)

Mahasweta thus makes historical documentation part of the text itself, adopting an unconventional narrative technique that incorporates different discourses within its fluid structure. Excerpts from journalistic reports, sociological/ anthropological treatises, historical and official archival documents and letters- all these make up her narratives, giving them a historical validity that the fictional framework cannot falsify. The different dialects and registers used by the characters also add to the historical framework of the narrative. This understated, matter-of-fact style sans any rhetorical flourishes has a truthful power of its own, as in this passage from “Pterodactyl”, “One goes to fetch wood, one pastures the goats ... one minds the younger kids, and even cooks. ...You can’t do family planning in a poor area. A poor household needs many children. (IM 139)

The passages that parody sociological and anthropological academic discourse on the tribal subject interrogate the role of such discourses in turning the “tribal” into an exotic species to be “preserved” and “studied” as inanimate, pre-historic objects. She radically engages with those practices of history and anthropology that “showcase” tribal culture through such discourses, while turning a blind eye to the actual socio-economic and political reasons for their marginalization. Stories like “Draupadi” and “Behind the Bodice” are also examples of this. Her journalistic and activist experience impinges organically on her narratives in the passages of compressed information about the ground realities of the situation at hand. In these sections she employs a powerfully direct style of presentation, with

thinly veiled attempts at political reportage adding to the realistic effect. She moves from one discourse to another and from one story to another, in a quick and often jarring way, never privileging one voice alone. It is in this juxtaposing of discourses that the key to her fiction lies.

Undoubtedly the most important aspect of Mahasweta's engagement with history is her embracing of the hitherto neglected and marginalized realm of the oral discourse of folk and tribal cultures. Her rejection of official and academic historiography and literary discourse in favour of the unchartered realm of orality has been one of the most committed and conscious acts of her personal and literary life. Sitakant Mahapatra has observed that the oral forms of folk and tribal culture had never been considered as legitimate or valuable sources of history in the academic study of tribes, but was treated as merely sociological or ethnographic data. They were also not considered as "literature" in any artistic sense of the term, but as cultural forms holding only curiosity value. (Beyond the Word 61-62) As Ayyappa Panikker remarks, "Uncodified, uncollected, unpublished yet, the tribal narrative in India is perhaps the richest, yet untapped, resource of the Indian narrative imagination." (Indian Narratology 120)

As in all societies, in tribal societies too, language, whether spoken or written, in its attendant artistic usages has been an expression of its cultural codes and an index of the civilization that produced it. Mahasweta's insight into tribal life and culture has led her to believe that the history and culture of India's tribes is ensconced in their oral traditions, "I am convinced that the local elements, the vast wealth of locally written and oral folk material are not only rich in language and thought, but are also important historical elements," she declares ("Untapped Resources" Seminar 16). Her effort has been to collect the unwritten wealth of the oral discourses of the folk and tribal streams of Indian culture, and to insert it as authentic historical and cultural material into her narratives. Mahasweta observes, "These

people do not find anyone writing about them, and they do not have script. They compose the stream of events into song... making their history” (“Telling History” Chotti Munda xi). This living folk history in the form of song, story, myth, legend and all forms of gossip and hearsay that script local histories of the unofficial version is incorporated into her narratives in their dialectal originality, and forms part of the tribals’ discourse foregrounded in them. She uses these traditions in her fiction in the sense that they functioned originally in tribal societies, ie, as a means of expression of the tribals’ everyday reality, their ethnic and cultural identity, and their history. Although Mahasweta departs radically from mainstream Bengali literature both in terms of style and subject, her writing harks back to many of the non-canonical narrative practices, especially the oral narratives of the tribal and folk streams, in her efforts to represent subaltern life, history and culture.

The Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism as a distinctive feature of life and literature, particularly the genre of the novel, is pertinent in a discussion of Mahasweta’s narrative technique. Michel Holquist notes that dialogism for Bakhtin was “a certain multiplicity in human perception that came about as a result of two or more bodies occupying simultaneous but separate space.” (20) Bakhtin perceived literature as a social activity and as a particular kind of discourse that used language in a dialogic way, as all meaning was always relative. For Bakhtin, literature, and the genre of the novel in particular, was “a means of ordering, schematizing the chaos of experience in a way that does not reduce, but preserves the variety and endlessness of experience” (22). Bakhtin defines the novel and its stylistics thus:

The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized... The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the different

individual voices that flourish under such conditions. ... This movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization- that is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel.

(“Discourse in the Novel” Norton Anthology 1192-3).

Mahasweta’s novels display all these features of Bakhtinian “novelness”. She rejects the linear, monologic and descriptive mode of narration traditionally associated with the sociological/anthropological discourse and historic and realistic novels that depict patterns of social life. Instead, she favours a loose, flexible narrative that incorporates different discourses, dialects and socio-linguistic registers drawn from various sources and which have an immediate bearing to the situation of the tribal. Her unconventional and daring experiments with language form the basis of her mode of narration. Foregoing a standardized, “literary” language, she adopts the living idiom of the characters, both tribal and non-tribal. The folk and tribal idiom takes the form of songs, sayings and folk tales besides dialogue. In the original Bengali, she has used what Bakhtin called “the living utterance” - all the variations of dialect and register, along with smatterings of English and Hindi, recreating the polygot situation of most of India’s community life.

Mahasweta’s fiction thus reveals a serious and sensitive attention to the issue of representing the tribal with truth and responsibility within the framework and literary conventions of the novel form. She rejects the conventional narrative tools of realistic fiction in her own tradition, and adopts an innovative and informed use of historical material, as well as the narrative resources indigenous to the tribals. In using the untapped wealth of oral tribal discourse, Mahasweta has not only found in it a source of valuable and credible historical material, but also an idiom suitable for the representation of tribal reality. The voice of the tribal is slowly but surely foregrounded among the various other voices that make up the narrative. In “Pterodactyl”, Mahasweta reminds us that the tribal past cannot be differentiated



into legend and history, and wonders where the “boundary between history and story” can be marked. “If we can get so much history out of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, what is the problem with Shankar’s nostalgia?” she asks. (IM 146) The aesthetics and idiom of orality play a sustained and organic role in Mahasweta’s articulation of tribal identity in the larger context of the Indian nation. In using the tribal idiom to express the tribes’ ethnic and existential ethos as well as their contemporary material reality, Mahasweta has restored to it its original function and value in tribal societies.

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